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SUBJECT: NAXALITES: AN EMERGING NATIONAL THREAT

REF: A. KOLKATA 162
[1](#)B. KOLKATA 164
[1](#)C. 08 KOLKATA 148

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Recent violence in West Bengal has focused attention on India's Maoist insurgency, which has become one of the most violent of its domestic conflicts. The broad network of Maoist cells, known as the Naxalite movement, is present in at least eleven of India's twenty-eight states, particularly in rural, impoverished and heavily forested eastern regions. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said the movement is the country's most serious internal security threat, and the incumbent United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government pledged this week to step up its response to Naxal guerrillas nationwide. The GOI response to past uprisings, however, has left much to be desired. Observers, including a recent Planning Commission Report, have pointed out that the government has largely failed to address genuine grievances of these predominantly tribal forest dwellers -- such as land rights and the need for infrastructure, health and education -- and has relied too heavily on strong-arm tactics through law enforcement, which have at times back-fired and further fueled the movement. Some in the government have attempted to address the land rights issues through the 2007 Forest Rights Act and the proposed National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy bill pending in Parliament. As with much else in India, it is enforcement that falls short. End Summary.

Naxalites: A Growing Force Nation-wide

[1](#)2. (U) Maoist insurgency, which grew out of a rural uprising in West Bengal in 1967, has spread to more than half of India's 28 states. These rebels, known as "Naxalites," operate across the "red corridor" stretching from the Nepal border to West Bengal, and through central India into the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. The GOI estimates up to 20,000 insurgents operating nationwide, in more than 180 of the country's 611 districts. Indian officials also point out that Maoist rebels have stepped up attacks in urban centers in eastern India, particularly West Bengal and Orissa, which underscores the depth and scope of the threat.

[1](#)3. (U) The Naxalites growing influence prompted Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2006 to declare the Maoist

insurgency the most serious threat to Indian national security. The GOI on June 22 banned and formally labeled the Communist Party of India (Maoist) a terrorist organization, hoping it would give security forces more powers to pursue rebel forces in Naxal-hit states. On June 9, PM Singh explained the GOI's "two prong" approach to tackling left-wing extremists: to expand social development programs in rural areas of affected states, while improving interagency counter-terror operations in all Naxal-hit states: Chhatisgarh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram reaffirmed the GOI's commitment to tackling the Maoist threat noting that the Congress Party-led government, re-elected in May with a greater Parliamentary majority, would respond with "speed and decisiveness."

Mass Violence and Instability

¶4. (U) According to government sources, Naxalite-related violence from 2005-2008 resulted in more than 1,900 civilian deaths-- more than either of India's two regional secessionist movements in Kashmir and the Northeast. During the same time, the number of security forces killed in Naxalite clashes doubled, while declining in other conflict zones. In April-May this year, militants attempted to disrupt voting in the early phases of India's parliamentary election by executing attacks throughout the turbulent eastern region killing more than twenty security personnel

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and civilians. Naxals regularly attack railway lines and factories aiming to cripple and destabilize economic activity in resource-rich parts of India. Many are following closely the on-going violence in Lalgarh, West Bengal -- where the JSW Steel Ltd USD 7 billion steel plant is located - fearing that a worsening security situation may scare away future business investment in the region (reftels).

Caste and Tribal Discrimination Feeds Recruits

¶5. (SBU) Little is known about the Naxals shadowy leadership structure, which does not court the media and seldom issues statements. Indian authorities believe they are led by Koteswar "Kishanjee" Rao and another individual who goes by the alias of "Ganapathi." Neither has been seen in public and are thought to be hiding in the dense forests along the Nepali border. Both militant leaders reportedly emerged as local organizers in eastern India, recruiting hundreds of poor villagers and arming them with bows, arrows and even rifles snatched from local police. Naxal followers tend to be Dalits, lower income, tribal and feel excluded from the economic benefits accruing from the natural resources -- especially coal -- from their states.

¶6. (SBU) According to Ajai Sahni of the Institute of Conflict Management, a Delhi think tank, Naxal recruits are among India's poorest -- "the most exploited, the bottom rung" from the rural areas of the nation's east, center and south. The GOI blames the Maoist forces for blocking development, such as road-building and public health and educational investment in desolate parts of the country. But Maoists often convince the local population that public projects ultimately help the government/private industry plunder their natural resources and extract profits. The Maoists take advantage of what Sahni calls "asymmetric expectations": since the government fails to deliver basic services to the people who need it most, and any good coming from the Maoists -- social work, land redistribution -- results in disproportionate gratitude from the local people.

Forest Land Rights Often Key Factor

¶7. (U) Much of the region affected by Naxalites are forest lands inhabited by Tribal peoples, also called Scheduled Tribes, or adivasis. Ownership of forest land had been defined until last year by two laws that declared forest land to be "settled" by a government forest settlement officer, who was supposed to process land claims by forest dwellers. However, recent studies indicated that more than 80% of forest blocks in Madhya Pradesh had not been settled as of 2003, while all the hilly tracts of Orissa were declared government forests without any survey, according to press reports. The central government sought to restore land ownership rights to tribal communities, who otherwise could -- and were -- often displaced from their cultivated lands by state agents on behalf of large industrialization or commodity mining projects by passing the 2007 Forest Rights Act (which was not notified until early 2008). In addition, President Patil announced in early June that the government would seek to amend and pass the pending Land Acquisition Act Amendments and the Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, both of which also seek to address the concerns of poorer agricultural workers who do not have clear land title rights but who would be deprived their livelihood if required to move off cultivated land.

¶8. (U) The government may also be influenced by the report last year from the Planning Commission, which examined the "development challenges in extremist affected areas." The Planning Commission noted that in addition to disadvantaged social and economic conditions, including lower education and health indicators, that "land alienation, forced evictions from land, and displacement" also fueled unrest. The report also pointed to the specific confluence of scheduled tribes

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living in forest areas, noting that nearly two-thirds of the country's forests lie in 187 tribal districts. It calls for enhanced education and health, electricity, and potable water to these districts, as well as passage and implementation of the Forest Rights Act and the pending Land Acquisition and Rehabilitation and Resettlement bills.

East India

¶9. (SBU) India's eastern region remains the epicenter of Naxal-related violence. The main extremist organization the CPI (Maoist) and other Naxal factions -- such as the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) and the People's War Group (PWG) -- have established a "corridor" through tribal areas in East India. New Delhi's Regional Security Officer met recently with state and police counterparts in Jharkhand to assess the ongoing violence. The Inspector General of Police was candid about the extent and strength of the insurgency in the state, noting that Naxalites had infiltrated 18 of 24 districts. He told us that Naxal capabilities have become more sophisticated over the last several years and may launch attacks in urban centers, including the state capital Ranchi.

¶10. (U) In the past three weeks, these groups have engaged in more violent and public acts in the western parts of West Bengal. According to media reports, around 300 Maoists wearing olive green fatigues and carrying guns rampaged tribal settlements of Banspahari, Shilda, Binpur and Lalgah in West Bengal, which has resulted in more than 25 deaths and countless injuries (Ref. A). Over the last four decades, renegade attacks, followed by counter-attacks, have been employed by extremist groups and political parties to command support in villages. Contacts told us that the incumbent government in West Bengal, led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), has become too weak to address the impending security crisis. They worry the situation can spiral out-of-control and spread to neighboring Jharkhand.

¶11. (SBU) CPM state leaders are largely divided on how to respond to the Maoist threat. The party faced a humiliating defeat in recent parliamentary elections (Ref. B), which has

emboldened extremist and anti-CPM factions. Naxal violence in Lalgarh appears focused on destabilizing the state government -- targeting CPM leaders' homes, party offices and security forces, while at least some of the local residents' support or neutrality seems to stem from the government's provision of 4500 acres of mainly forest land to JSW Steel for its steel plant. Press reports indicate a generally held belief that the land was supposed to be redistributed among the local villagers. Many believe the state police and district administration are unwilling to meet the challenge of standing up to Maoist forces; in their view, the police do not want to risk the collateral damage, while government officials have been "demoralized" by recent events and worry that they have lost popular support.

¶12. (SBU) According to West Bengal Inspector General of Police, Raj Kanojia, the GOI has sent five additional companies of paramilitary troops to assist local police in and around Lalgarh. Contacts told us that central forces would strike back at Maoist militants only as a last resort noting government fears that any sudden action could cause another "Nandigram," the violent March 2007 Naxal-state police encounter that resulted in over 14 civilian deaths (Ref. C). "If the government cracks down in Lalgarh, there will be gunfights and lots of dead bodies. The government can't afford after what happened in Nandigram," Ajai Sahni explained.

Western India

¶13. (SBU) While Chhattisgarh has been a traditional stronghold of Maoist factions, Maharashtra has also seen a rise in violent activity in recent years. This is likely due

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to the shared borders of the two states, where remote hill and jungle lands harbor a large Maoist population. The government and police presence in these areas is scarce to non-existent, enabling Maoist groups to take refuge in and authority over these mostly-tribal regions. The Maoist threat appears so fierce, according to experts, because they have been countered with a haphazard and at times, a hapless response from the state governments involved, who have failed to coordinate, train their security officials and put serious efforts into eliminating some of the development problems that allow Maoists to take root in the first place.

¶14. (SBU) In Chhattisgarh, there has been a steady drumbeat of Naxal-related violence from 2005-2008 with 140 reported deaths (Naxals, civilians and security personnel) so far this year. Maharashtra, however, has seen a sudden spurt in violence; there have been 54 Naxal-related deaths this year, compared to fourteen in 2008. In June 2009, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra state governments met with the Home Ministry to discuss opportunities for improved state-central government coordination in combating Naxals.. Following the Home Ministry meeting, the Maharashtra State Home Minister told local media that his government would focus on improved intelligence sharing with other Naxal-affected states and consider deployment of the Central Reserve Police Force (CPRF) in Maharashtra. (Note: Chhattisgarh already has a CPRF presence. End note.)

South India

¶15. (SBU) Maoists are most active in Andhra Pradesh (AP), with a noticeable presence in Karnataka as well. Their activities in Tamil Nadu and Kerala are negligible, and incidents of Maoist violence in these two states are extremely rare. AP has the most heralded anti-Maoist unit in India, which has been effective at putting the Maoists on the run in the state and in training similar units from other states. In general, state governments in the South appear to cooperate well on this issue and appear to devote sufficient

resources to keep violent Maoist activity largely in check. Southern states, with the partial exception of Karnataka, are generally positive about the level of support they receive from the central government.

¶16. (U) Incidents of Maoist violence in AP have declined 30 percent in 2008 over the previous year. During the first five months of 2009, Maoist violence resulted in seven deaths compared to 40 in 2008. AP police have been successful in pinpointing movements of armed Maoist violent activity. As a result, more than 1600 Maoists surrendered to local law authorities since the beginning of 2005. Maoist activity in Karnataka is generally low, concentrated in the rural, central areas of the state. Police contacts in Karnataka claim that the Maoists in the state are those who fled AP after intensified police operations.

¶17. (U) AP has emerged as the national standard bearer for countering Maoist groups by creating a special unit known as the "greyhounds.". Police sources tell us that AP units are fully equipped and adequately resourced to counter renegade forces, and they are currently focused on strengthening border protection with Orissa and Chhattisgarh. Karnataka's Anti-Naxal Force (ANF), formed in May 2005, has made significant gains tracking down and capturing Maoists across the state. ANF and state police on June 13 apprehended Kanyakumari AKA Viyayabai, a most-wanted Maoist suspected of killing a police constable in 2007. Improved human intelligence also led to the arrest of two Maoist leaders in April this year, which led to the recovery of more than 100 kilograms of explosive material.

Comment: Poverty, Powerlessness and Dispossession: Naxals' Bread and Butter

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¶18. (SBU) The Naxal movement threatens the GOI in one of its weakest spots: delivery of basic services and redress of socially disadvantaged groups. While Naxals do not directly threaten the government in Delhi, they have the power to deter investment and development in some of India's poorest regions, which also happen to be rich in vital resources such as iron and coal. The predominance of Naxalite activity in mostly forested, tribal inhabited areas points to the importance of land titles and transparent and fair compensation for officially landless poor, who are deprived of livelihood and culture when their communal lands are doled out by state governments. End Comment.

BURLEIGH